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A-Weapons Must Be Limited If Used in South Vietnam

"THE ENEMIES of science alternately abuse its exponents for being deaf to moral considerations and for interfering in ethical problems which do not concern them. Both of these criticisms cannot be right."

I WAS reminded of this quotation from J. B. S. Haldane by a telephone call I received a few days ago from Dr. Owen Chamberlain, a professor of physics at the University of California at Berkeley and a 1959 recipient of the Nobel Prize. He referred to insistent rumors that President Johnson was contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons to save the situation at Khesanh.

He was deeply alarmed at this prospect and, anticipating that I might share that alarm, asked me to join in a group statement about it to the President and to the press.

I had to reply that the scientists' consensus on the danger of progressive escalation resulting from any use of nuclear weapons had been widely advertised for the last 22 years. In particular, Dr. Chamberlain's opinion in such a crisis was quite predictable and had probably already been anticipated and discounted in the President's analysis of public reaction. Besides, does an academic physicist—not to mention a geneticist such as myself—have any special wisdom or politically relevant information on this subject?

THE ANSWER is, "probably not." For a few years after 1945, scientists did have a particular foresight as to the ultimate destructive potential of nuclear warfare, and worked hard and successfully to communicate this information to the public. No one now doubts that existing stockpiles of nuclear weapons are capable

of destroying human civilization. That scientists knew this first is no proof that any of us knows best how to keep it from happening.

The President might argue that the U.S. had to be ready to use tactical nuclear arms in the gravest emergencies in order to sustain the credibility that we would ever use them. In turn, the stability of the nuclear stalemate rests on the visible likelihood of an irrational and vengeful response by either side to a sufficiently provocative attack. But we must remain in a dilemma about advertising, even knowing, what our threshold of provocation will be. Otherwise we invite (and ourselves engage in) probing actions just beneath that uncertain ceiling.

Will tactical use lead to prompt escalation of nuclear war?

The sheer unpredictability of the answer is the most alarming element of the proposal. The scientists' propaganda that escalation is inevitable helps make it so.

In order to prevent indefinite escalation, we must quickly mobilize the discussion needed to establish a consensus on carefully staged levels of reaction. In desperation, let us suggest one such level now: defensive use of tactical nuclear weapons within the boundaries of South Vietnam and only with the support of its recognized government.

I HAVE NOT yet heard my physicist friends speculate on what I foresee as the worst of the predictable consequences of tactical deployment: the breakup of our Atlantic and other regional defense organizations.

The military use of nuclear weapons of any size carries an emotional impact which may or may not be ra-

tional but is surely real. If they are used by the U.S. without consultation, how will any European government justify to itself or its constituency the vital faith that the U.S. will not in future adopt an equally independent policy on strategic weapons when its own survival is at stake?

A scientist's comment on such matters should be evaluated on its own merits (as should the President's). His right and duty to comment is no less than that of any other citizen's. His zeal to comment is certainly sharpened by his sense of moral responsibility for the way in which his technical contributions are put to human use.

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